

FEBRUARY 2009 **BULLETIN** Northwest Public Power Association

**The three phases that keep
Hill County's workforce and
Montana energized**



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While the industry continues to talk about retirement booms and workforce development, Hill County Electric (HCE) is doing something a bit different; HCE is using a three-phase approach to not only address workforce development for their rural electric utility that serves 2,200 members, but to also increase development statewide. The following outlines the three-phase path that HCE has taken to effectively address both.

Phase 1

A decade ago, the trustees of Hill County Electric recognized the rate at which electrical line technicians and journeyman linemen would be retiring in our cooperative and across the nation. The trustees saw that they would inevitably face a shortage of qualified, trained journeymen linemen if they did not take proactive measures. They worked with management to put together an action plan to address the recruitment, training, and retention of journeyman linemen in Montana.

With Baby Boomers reaching retirement age, and given that most linemen in Montana were within 10 years of retiring, then general manager John Magyar said, "Much of Montana's linework job force is aging, so many opportunities might exist for hardworking, trained individuals who want to stay in state if the cooperative helped to open up those opportunities."

Thus, the Hill County Electric Cooperative Workforce Development Scholarship fund was created in December 2000; it was offered to any person who successfully completed a lineman's program at an accredited school and planned to return to Montana to work. The scholarship paid the recipient \$1,000 toward the cost of obtaining the education and or



The May 2008 pre-apprentice lineman graduates of Montana Tech at Butte proudly pose in their pole yard. All photos courtesy of Jordan Hagen and Jack Solomon.

equipment and tools. Since then, the HCE Workforce Development Scholarship has been awarded to three applicants; two of those winners came in during the last two years, owing to a 2007 accredited line technician pre-apprentice program begun in Montana.

Phase 2

Prior to 2007, Montana students planning to enter the electrical linework field had few choices for their training and education; at the time, all were out of state and for years, Hill County Electric sent plenty of dollars out of state in the form of tuition, travel, and living expenses.

Possibly the greatest cost came when those Montana natives stayed in the state where they received their education and then became employed taxpayers. According to the Montana Department of Labor and Industry, electrical lineworkers are in the top 10

percent of wage earners in Montana, with an average salary of \$60,000 plus full benefits. The income taxes paid by these workers are significant. To lose those dollars to a neighboring state such as North Dakota or Idaho was an economic drain. Hill County Electric again addressed this issue by supporting the efforts to bring a fully accredited education program to our state.

Private and public partners came together to form a program at the University of Montana, Montana Tech, College of Technology in Butte. The Montana Tech program was to prepare participants for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers' (IBEW) apprenticeship program.

Critical funding for the program came from the U.S. Department of Labor in the form of *Workforce Investment Act* funds with additional funding coming from the state Workforce Training Grant, the

Montana Electrical Cooperatives' Association, IBEW, Montana Dakota Utilities, NorthWestern Energy, and several individual electric cooperatives including Hill County Electric Cooperative.

In December 2007, the program graduated the first class of 21 students including Kris Cote of Havre, Mont. Cote had been selected to receive the 2007 HCE Workforce Development \$1,000 Scholarship. He spent the summer prior to lineman's school working for the cooperative and some of the state's best lineworkers, including 30-year veteran HCE line foreman Jack Solomon. With an apprenticeship position open, HCE interviewed and hired Cote in early 2008. By then Solomon had officially retired, but was still doing contract work for HCE.

Unable to leave his beloved industry, in 2008, Solomon became one of the two full-time instructors for the lineman school at Montana Tech. Solomon's knowledge from decades of experience is invaluable and is being transferred to the next generation of linemen in Montana.

Recent graduate of the Montana Tech program, Jordan Hagen, first learned about the lineman's school

from a neighbor who had gone to Meridian, Idaho, for his training. Hagen planned to head there, too, after he graduated from Havre High in 2008, but then the state opened up its program at Montana Tech. By staying in state, Hagen not only saved on tuition and travel expenses, he received aid from a grant funded by the Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development (WIRED) Initiative. Montana's \$15 million WIRED award was one of 13 awarded nationally out of 97 applicants.

Hagen said that he is busy applying for available groundsman positions in Montana, though he has other options as well. "Through the Montana Tech program I acquired my CDL (commercial driver's license) and my certification for flagging," he said. "We also got certified in CPR and AED (automated external defibrillator)."

Additional training from experts around the state serving as volunteer guest instructors prepares the students for winter survival and safety; marking underground utilities according to uniform safety standards and provides metering technology instruction.



Top: Kris Cote, 2007 HCE Workforce Scholarship recipient; Middle: Jordan Hagen, recent Montana Tech graduate; Bottom: Jack Solomon, Montana Tech instructor.

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Montana Tech's lineman school boasts wide-open classrooms where students use the pole yard to practice climbing, safety, and unbelting around obstacles, among other tasks.

Along with cash support, the program has also received support in the form of donated poles, equipment, training instructors, and bucket trucks from Hill County Electric and other Montana utilities.

To become a licensed journeyman lineman, Hagen will need to obtain additional education and experience through on-the-job training which typically takes three-and-a-half to four years, plus he must successfully pass all

required tests. Hagen added that this program was perfect for him because he wanted to stay in Montana and work outdoors. A four-year program did not appeal to him as much and he is excited to have this phase of his education and training already completed while many of his friends are only in their first year of college. Hagen is confident he has made a powerful career choice.

Phase 3

For various reasons (safety often cited as being the primary concern), industry regulations and state laws require a ratio of three journeyman linemen for every apprentice lineman employed at a utility. This limits the number of possible apprenticeships available in the state and creates a situation of more qualified apprentices than open slots. To address this, Hill County Electric and many other electric cooperatives employ apprentices in the position of groundsman. There they can get valuable experience and possible credit toward their apprenticeship and journeyman lineman certification. Contractors and engineering firms also offer employment opportunities that advance apprentices' careers.

Montana has a rich apprenticeship program; along with the pre-apprenticeship program for linemen offered at Montana Tech, the Montana Apprenticeship Program has established working partnerships with several four-year institutions, colleges of technology, and community colleges across Montana. The program has working agreements with the following colleges in Montana:

- MSU Northern in Havre — AAS degree programs in plumbing technology and electrical technology
- Flathead Valley Community College in Kalispell — One-year certificate program in plumbing technology and AAS degree program in electrical construction
- BILT Grant Partnership in Carpentry — Two-year AAS degree program in carpentry established at MSU Northern,

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- three community colleges, and three colleges of technology
- MSU Billings — Pre-apprenticeship power plant process
- University of Montana, Montana Tech, College of Technology in Butte — Pre-apprenticeship lineman school

Besides the lineman scholarship, Hill County Electric also offers a Workforce Development \$500 Scholarship for students enrolled in the electrical technology program at MSU Northern. (More information about this scholarship can be found at <http://msun.edu/academics/cots/program-Electrical.htm>.)

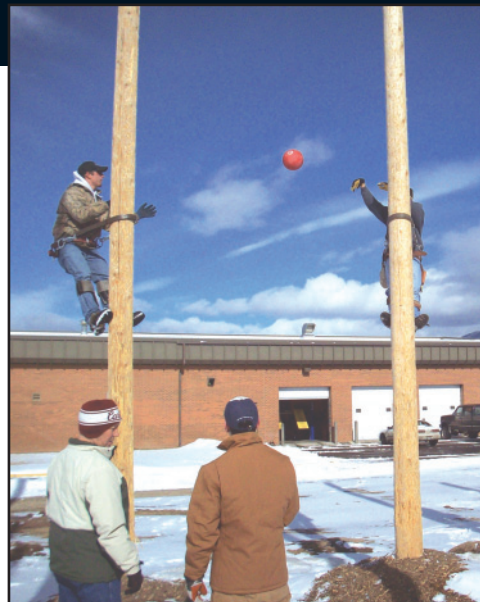
According to data compiled by the Department of Labor and Industry, of all those completing apprenticeship programs since 1997, 85 percent are still working in Montana in the occupations in which they apprenticed. The average hourly wage rate for a third-year registered apprentice in Montana is \$18.22, which amounts to an average gross annual wage of \$37,897.60; an estimated \$5,000 higher than the average Montana income.

The average journeyman rate for completing apprenticeships in Montana currently ranges from \$22 to \$40 per hour. Montana companies and organizations sponsoring apprenticeships paid over \$54 million dollars in wages to Montana apprentices in FY 2007 and FY 2008. With the average age of an apprentice ranging from 26 to 34 years, clearly the younger generation is creating individual wealth and contributing to economic growth. Success can also be measured in that Montana's registered apprentices paid an estimated \$8.5 million in both state and federal income taxes from 2007 to 2008. Based on the Montana Apprenticeship and Training Program budget of \$456,000, for every dollar the state invested in registered apprenticeships, employers paid \$119.51 in wages and apprentices contributed \$19.18 in taxes. Of the 1,460 registered apprentices in Montana, six percent work in the utility-related industries.

Mark Maki, program supervisor of the Montana Apprenticeship and

Training Program sums up the efforts best: "The Montana line school established at the Butte College of Technology was a great collaboration by the transmission industry in Montana. The joint efforts of the Montana cooperatives, NorthWestern Energy, the IBEW, the College of Technology, and the Montana Department of Labor and Industry formulated a training program that will provide the industry with qualified and apprenticeship-ready applicants." **NWPPA**

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Students at Montana Tech participate in a medicine ball exercise, eight feet off the ground. Throwing the ball back and forth helps students become adept at working with both hands instead of holding on to the pole with one hand.



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